

News Release



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Sussex County adopts 911 addressing ordinance

GEORGETOWN, Del. – Sussex County property owners who fail to post their county-assigned 911 addresses are now on notice: refusal to comply will lead to fines.

County Council, at its Tuesday, Oct. 25, meeting, unanimously adopted an ordinance that will for the first time establish penalties for those property owners who do not post their 911 addresses. Violators would be notified by certified mail, and have 15 days to comply.

Failure to comply with the ordinance after that 15-day period would result in a \$50 fine. That would increase 14 days later to a \$100-a-day fine if a property owner continues to violate the ordinance.

The penalty system outlined in the new ordinance will take effect in 18 months.

County officials say the measure is necessary to ensure that 911 addresses the county has spent years assigning – and is nearly finished distributing – are prominently displayed so emergency workers can do their jobs.

“Today, council has taken a big step forward in protecting the citizens of Sussex County,” said Matthew Laick, director of the Sussex County Mapping & Addressing Department. “I’m pleased that this decision means that the residents of Sussex County will be easier to find in times of emergency.”

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-- Continued from Page 1 --

Sussex County has been readdressing more than 90,000 houses and businesses throughout the nearly 950-square-mile county since the 1990s. In the readdressing project, unique number and street name combinations – instead of vague rural routes and post office boxes – have been assigned to show the physical location of residences and businesses.

Those physical addresses, once assigned, are then mapped so emergency personnel know where a particular house or business is located. The information is also stored in telephone company databases, so that when someone calls 911, the location from which that person is dialing is displayed on a dispatcher's screen.

Council adopted the ordinance Tuesday following a public hearing, with one amendment to the original draft. That amendment will require 3-inch numbers to be displayed on mail boxes or on signs at the road front of a residential property; elsewhere, such as on a house set farther back from the road, more visible 4-inch numbers would be required.

Sussex County Emergency Medical Services officials, as well as members of the local fire service, urged Sussex County Council to adopt the ordinance – for the sake of public safety.

“The delivery of emergency medical services is extremely time sensitive. The quicker we get there, the better the outcome,” said Bob Stuart, deputy director of Sussex County EMS. “Today, as it stands, we generally know where we are going on an emergency call. But too often we cannot locate the exact position of those who call for our help, because many houses and businesses are not marked with their addresses. This ordinance will provide emergency services with accurate addresses so those who need our services can be located with greater efficiency.”

Terry Whitham, the 911 administrator for the state of Delaware, praised council's decision. “Absolutely, this was the right thing to do. And it's going to make Sussex County a leader in the state,” said Whitham, noting Sussex is the first county to adopt such a requirement with penalties.

Fire officials said residents should view the council action not as one of imposing fines, but as an act of ensuring public safety. “Getting to people is key. If you can't find them, you can't help them,” said Jeff Lynch, chief of the Roxana Fire Company. “That's the long and short of it.”

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